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ABSTRACT

The labor market experience of individuals between their 18th and 30th birthdays were analyzed. Data from the Youth cohort of the National Longitudinal Surveys showed that, between the ages of 18 and 30, a typical individual had held 7.5 jobs and had 8.6 years of work experience. This suggested that workers between these ages experienced 3.4 years of joblessness. On their 30th birthday, over 40 percent of workers had held their current job for 2 years or less, and about a quarter had been at their job more than 6 years. However, only 15 percent of individuals had spent 2 years or less in the longest job held between age 18 and 30, and about 30 percent had spent more than 6 years in the longest job. The average time spent at the longest job held between age 18 and age 30 was 5 years. Blacks and female high school dropouts tended to have the least work experience and the least job tenure by age 30. (YLB)

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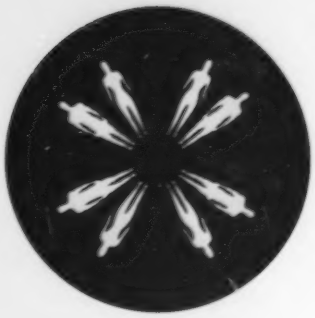

Work and Family: Turning Thirty—Job Mobility and Labor Market Attachment

Data from the National Longitudinal Surveys

U.S. Department of Labor
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Report 862
December 1993

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This issue of *Work and Family* analyzes the labor market experience of individuals between their 18th and 30th birthdays. Some of the more significant findings include: Between the ages of 18 and 30, a typical individual has held 7.5 jobs and has 8.6 years of work experience.[1] This suggests that workers between these ages experience 3.4 years of joblessness. On their 30th birthday, over 40 percent of workers have held their current job for 2 years or less, and about a quarter have been at their job more than 6 years. However, only 15 percent of individuals have spent 2 years or less in the longest job held between age 18 and 30, and about 30 percent have spent more than 6 years in the longest job. The average time spent at the longest job held between age 18 and age 30 is 5 years. Blacks and female high school dropouts tend to have the least work experience and the least job tenure by age 30.

Overview

Most individuals change jobs frequently in their initial years in the labor market.[2] Churning through the labor market, young workers learn about different jobs, and firms learn about the productivity of young workers. Workers can experiment with various types of jobs and eventually decide on a career. In these early years, individuals are also more likely to move into and out of the labor market because of decisions relating to schooling, marital status, childbearing, and other factors.

As workers age, employment tends to stabilize, and the workers will more likely become attached to jobs. Does the process by which young workers establish a career path take too long? One might think that by age 30, a typical individual should have settled into a job and completed the transition from school to work. However, past research indicates that at age 30, a substantial percent of workers has been at their current job for a very short time.[3]

Also discussed in this report is the labor market behavior of individuals as measured on the day they turn 30. Four dimensions of labor force behavior are analyzed: Number of jobs held, number of years worked, years spent on the current job, and years spent on the longest job. The data for the number of jobs held, number of years worked, and longest job held all refer to the period ranging from the individual's 18th to 30th birthdays. Time spent on the current job is measured for working individuals on their 30th birthday.

This report uses data from the Youth cohort of the National Longitudinal Surveys. These data describe a sample of young men and women who were between the ages of 14 and 22 in 1979, and who have been interviewed annually since that year. A key feature of this survey is that it garners information in an event-history format, in which dates are collected for the beginning and ending of important life events. In the case of employment, the starting date for every job is recorded, and if a person stops working for an employer, the ending date is recorded as well.[4]

For multiple jobholders, information is gathered for each job, with starting and ending dates. Periods of nonwork within a period of employment—such as layoffs, or absences from work due to illness, pregnancy, and so forth—are also recorded. By recording the dates of all jobs and all periods of nonwork, the survey provides a nearly complete employment history for each individual in the sample.

The sample used here is restricted to those individuals whose 18th birthday occurred after January 1, 1978 and whose 30th birthday occurred before the individual was interviewed in 1991. For the dimensions of labor market behavior analyzed, the average (mean) value is presented. In addition, in order to get a sense of the distribution of these measures, the median (the value at which one-half of the sample is above and one-half is below) as well as the percent of individuals falling into various categories are presented.

[1] See also *Work and Family: Jobs Held and Weeks Worked by Young Adults*, Report 827 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 1992).

[2] See Robert H. Topel and Michael P. Ward, "Job Mobility and the Careers of Young Men," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 107, No. 2, 1992, pp. 439-479.

[3] See Paul Osterman, "Is There a Problem with the Youth Labor Market and If So, How Should We Fix It?" working paper, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992.

[4] A job is defined as a period of work with a particular employer. For self-employed workers, each "new" job is defined by the individuals themselves.

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Table 1. Number of jobs held from 18th to 30th birthdays

Characteristic	Mean	Median	Distribution of jobs (in percent)			
			0-3	4-6	7-9	10 or more
Total	7.5	7.0	18.8	28.5	26.0	26.7
White	7.7	7.0	17.4	28.0	26.2	28.4
Black	6.5	6.0	23.4	30.2	26.8	19.6
Hispanic	6.4	6.0	26.7	32.1	20.5	20.7
High school dropouts	6.8	6.0	24.7	31.1	20.0	24.2
High school graduates	6.8	6.0	23.8	31.3	24.4	20.5
Some college	8.1	7.0	16.5	25.7	24.9	32.9
College graduates	8.1	8.0	10.2	25.0	31.8	33.0
Men	7.6	7.0	18.3	27.0	25.3	29.4
White	7.8	7.0	18.0	26.3	24.9	30.8
Black	6.9	7.0	17.1	29.7	30.6	22.6
Hispanic	6.9	6.0	25.1	29.5	17.9	27.5
High school dropouts	8.0	7.0	16.7	31.0	17.2	35.1
High school graduates	7.2	6.0	22.4	28.7	23.8	25.1
Some college	8.3	8.0	20.8	27.7	18.4	39.1
College graduates	7.7	8.0	10.8	25.6	35.6	28.0
Women	7.3	7.0	19.2	30.0	26.6	24.2
White	7.6	7.0	16.8	29.6	27.4	26.2
Black	6.1	5.0	29.5	30.7	23.1	16.7
Hispanic	5.8	5.0	28.5	34.8	23.4	13.3
High school dropouts	5.5	5.0	33.5	31.4	23.2	11.9
High school graduates	6.4	6.0	25.2	34.0	24.9	15.9
Some college	8.0	7.0	13.5	28.5	29.5	28.5
College graduates	8.6	8.0	9.6	24.4	28.1	37.9

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

Jobs held

Data on the number of jobs held from an individual's 18th to 30th birthdays are provided in table 1. Between these ages, individuals have held 7.5 jobs on average. Over a quarter have held 10 or more jobs, while fewer than 1 in 5 have held 3 or fewer jobs.

By age 30, blacks and Hispanics have held about one job fewer than whites on average. Individuals with some college (13-15 years of education) and college graduates average over one job more than those with 12 years of education or less. Both the racial/ethnic and educational differences exist largely because whites and those with 13 or more years of education are more likely to have held 10 or more jobs and less likely to have held 3 or fewer jobs.

Men and women average about the same number of jobs held by age 30, and the differences by race/ethnicity within each gender category reflect the overall racial/ethnic differences, in that whites average about one more job than blacks and Hispanics. Although there is no consistent pattern in the number of jobs held for men by education, the data for women suggest that there is a strong positive relationship between education and the number of jobs held. In particular, female college graduates have held about three more jobs than female high school dropouts by age 30. Less than 10 percent of female college graduates have held three or fewer jobs, compared to about a third of female high school dropouts.

Work experience

Table 2 provides the number of years of work experience between age 18 and age 30.[5] On average, individuals worked about 8.6 years, or over two-thirds of the 12 years between age 18 and 30. The median value for years worked indicates that half worked over 9.4 years, or about three-fourths of the 12-year period. About 2 in 5 individuals worked over 11 years, while fewer than 1 in 5 worked 6 or fewer years.

Whites worked about 1 year more than Hispanics, and about 2 years more than blacks between ages 18 and 30. Nearly half of all whites worked 11 or more years, and about a third of Hispanics and less than a quarter of blacks worked 11 years or more. Individuals with 12 years of education or more average about 9 years of work; high school dropouts average about 7 years. Over a third of high school dropouts worked 6 or fewer years, or less than half of the time between ages 18 and 30.

Men on average worked about 1 year more than women during these ages. White and Hispanic men are similar in

[5] Years of work experience were generated by computing total weeks worked between the 18th and 30th birthdays and dividing by 52.

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Table 2. Years of work experience from 18th to 30th birthdays

Characteristic	Mean	Median	Distribution of years (in percent)			
			0-6	7-8	9-10	11-12
Total	8.6	9.4	17.9	14.5	25.6	42.0
White	9.0	9.7	13.8	14.0	26.4	45.8
Black	6.9	7.7	37.3	16.4	22.4	23.9
Hispanic	7.8	8.9	26.6	15.5	23.1	34.8
High school dropouts	6.8	7.3	37.9	16.1	19.2	26.8
High school graduates	8.7	9.9	20.5	11.3	19.7	48.5
Some college	9.0	9.8	16.1	12.0	24.3	47.6
College graduates	9.0	9.3	6.8	20.5	38.7	34.0
Men	9.3	10.0	11.4	13.0	25.7	49.9
White	9.6	10.0	7.6	11.5	26.1	54.8
Black	7.3	7.8	33.0	19.6	23.4	24.0
Hispanic	9.1	10.4	10.7	16.9	25.3	47.1
High school dropouts	8.8	10.6	17.4	14.8	19.7	48.1
High school graduates	9.6	10.7	11.9	7.2	20.3	60.6
Some college	9.4	10.6	12.0	11.3	21.3	55.4
College graduates	8.9	9.0	7.6	22.6	39.9	29.9
Women	8.1	8.8	24.0	15.8	25.6	34.6
White	8.4	9.3	19.6	16.4	26.6	37.4
Black	6.5	7.2	41.4	13.5	21.4	23.7
Hispanic	6.5	7.4	43.6	14.0	20.8	21.6
High school dropouts	4.7	4.6	60.6	17.6	18.7	3.1
High school graduates	7.8	8.6	29.3	15.5	19.1	36.1
Some college	8.7	9.3	18.9	12.5	26.4	42.2
College graduates	9.2	9.4	6.0	18.6	37.5	37.9

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

their work experience, in that both average over 9 years, whereas black men average under 8 years. For women, blacks and Hispanics are more similar, as they both average about 6.5 years of experience, whereas white women average 8.4 years.

Since many college graduates attend school full time while others are working, it might be expected that college graduates average less work experience than others at age 30. The data indicate that male high school graduates and those with some college register the greatest amount of work experience between ages 18 and 30. High school dropouts and college graduates average slightly less work experience. Although about 1 in 5 male high school dropouts worked 6 or fewer years, about half worked 11 or more years. Hence, while there is a group of male high school graduates with little work experience, a large percent are strongly attached to the labor force.

The positive relationship between education and work experience is stronger for females than for males. Female college graduates worked over 4 years more than female high school dropouts during the 12 years. Only about 3 percent of female high school dropouts worked 11 or more years, while over 60 percent worked 6 or fewer years. Conversely, nearly 38 percent of female college graduates worked 11 or more years, and only 6 percent of female college graduates worked 6 or fewer years during these ages.

Time spent on current job

One measure of whether an individual has settled into a career is time spent with the current employer. Table 3 presents data on the number of years spent on the current job for working individuals on their 30th birthday. On average, workers have spent 3.8 years in their current job when they turn 30. However, the median indicates that half of the workers spent 2.7 years or fewer at the current job.

The disparity between the mean and median exists because a large fraction of individuals are polarized at both ends of the distribution, which strongly affects the mean, but has no impact on the median. Many persons show little job attachment at age 30: About a quarter of the individuals have spent a year or less at their current job, and over 42 percent have been on the job for 2 years or less. Another group has substantial job attachment: About a quarter of the 30-year-olds have spent over 6 years on the current job.

There are only small differences by race/ethnicity in current tenure; Hispanics average the most years worked and blacks the fewest. Interestingly, high school graduates have the most job tenure on their 30th birthday, as close to

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Table 3. Years spent on current job among those employed on 30th birthday

Characteristic	Mean	Median	Distribution of years (in percent)						
			1 or less	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	More than 6
Total	3.8	2.7	25.3	17.4	10.7	7.8	7.2	6.3	25.3
White	3.9	2.7	24.7	17.8	10.2	7.3	7.3	6.7	26.0
Black	3.4	2.2	30.7	15.8	14.2	8.7	7.6	2.8	20.2
Hispanic	4.2	3.5	22.0	14.5	9.8	12.8	4.9	7.9	28.1
High school dropouts	3.0	2.1	36.9	9.8	14.8	11.7	7.1	5.3	14.4
High school graduates	4.4	2.8	27.2	15.4	8.9	4.4	7.7	5.5	30.9
Some college	3.6	2.5	26.8	17.6	12.0	8.6	6.5	6.6	21.9
College graduates	3.6	2.9	18.2	22.2	10.9	10.6	7.3	7.4	23.3
Men	4.0	2.9	23.8	17.3	9.5	6.7	8.8	6.0	27.9
White	4.1	3.1	23.4	17.4	9.0	6.2	8.5	6.6	28.9
Black	3.3	2.4	27.5	18.3	13.0	7.3	12.6	2.6	18.7
Hispanic	4.6	3.5	20.4	13.6	9.6	11.8	6.0	4.5	34.1
High school dropouts	3.2	2.1	41.2	4.9	15.4	7.0	8.5	3.0	20.0
High school graduates	4.5	3.2	24.7	16.8	7.5	3.6	9.8	4.9	32.7
Some college	3.8	2.6	24.3	18.0	12.8	7.3	6.4	6.4	24.8
College graduates	3.8	3.5	15.8	22.0	8.5	10.8	9.0	8.6	25.3
Women	3.7	2.4	27.2	17.5	12.0	9.0	5.4	6.6	22.3
White	3.7	2.5	26.2	18.2	11.6	8.6	6.0	6.8	22.6
Black	3.4	2.2	34.5	13.0	15.5	10.2	2.1	2.9	21.8
Hispanic	3.6	2.6	24.3	15.9	10.3	14.2	3.3	13.1	18.9
High school dropouts	2.5	2.1	29.2	18.7	13.5	20.3	4.5	9.6	4.2
High school graduates	4.2	2.7	30.7	13.5	10.9	5.4	4.8	6.3	28.4
Some college	3.5	2.4	28.8	17.3	11.4	9.6	6.5	6.7	19.7
College graduates	3.8	2.6	21.1	22.4	13.6	10.5	5.3	6.1	21.0

Note: The 1- to 2- year category implies that an individual spent more than 1 year and less than or equal to 2 years on the current job. The other categories are defined similarly.

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

a third of high school graduates have been at their current job more than 6 years. In contrast, over a third of high school dropouts have been at their current job for 1 year or less.

There are very small differences in current tenure between employed men and women, and the racial/ethnic differences in current tenure largely reflect the differences among men. Hispanic men average the highest level of current tenure and black men the lowest. For both men and women, high school graduates average more job tenure than any of the other educational groups. Female high school dropouts have the least tenure on their current job at age 30: Only 4.2 percent had been at the job more than 6 years.

Time spent on longest job

Time spent on the current job may be a misleading measure of whether individuals settle into a particular career path, since at age 30, some individuals may have recently changed jobs due to improved opportunities or career advancement. A better measure of whether individuals establish themselves in a particular career path by age 30 is the time spent at the longest job held between age 18 and 30. This figure provides a better picture of total work experience than current tenure because it incorporates information over all the ages rather than just at a single age.

Table 4 shows the time spent on the longest job between an individual's 18th and 30th birthdays. Individuals average 5 years in the job which they held the longest over these ages. Unlike time spent on the current job, the distribution for time spent on the longest job is not polarized at both ends. If anything, it is skewed toward the upper end of the distribution. For instance, half of the individuals had been at the longest job for 4.4 years, and over 30 percent of the individuals had been at a job for more than 6 years. In contrast, just over 5 percent held a job for a year or less, and 15 percent spent 2 years or less on the longest job.

Whites spent the longest time in any one job, followed by Hispanics and blacks. Blacks are less likely than others to be attached to a single employer for an extended period of time. While over 30 percent of whites and Hispanics spent 6 or more years with one employer, only about 20 percent of blacks did so.

There is very little difference in time spent on the longest job for those with 12 or more years of education. Although high school dropouts spent the least time on the longest job, they still average nearly 4 years with one employer. However, about 1 in 5 high school dropouts never holds a job for more than 1 year between age 18 and 30. About 1 percent of college graduates held their longest jobs for a year or less.

Table 4. Years spent on the longest job held from 18th to 30th birthdays

Characteristic	Mean	Median	Distribution of years (in percent)						
			1 or less	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	More than 6
Total	5.0	4.4	5.4	9.6	13.8	16.0	13.6	10.7	30.9
White	5.2	4.6	3.5	8.4	13.7	16.0	14.3	11.5	32.6
Black	4.0	3.3	13.9	15.4	16.3	16.3	10.3	6.6	21.2
Hispanic	4.7	4.2	12.5	11.6	9.1	14.2	12.1	9.2	31.3
High school dropouts	3.9	3.1	18.6	13.3	13.1	12.9	12.4	9.4	20.3
High school graduates	5.3	4.6	6.0	10.9	14.1	12.6	11.5	8.6	36.3
Some college	5.0	4.4	2.9	11.4	11.9	13.2	14.9	11.8	28.9
College graduates	4.8	4.7	1.1	4.6	15.1	20.9	16.5	13.7	28.1
Men	5.3	4.8	3.8	6.8	13.7	15.8	13.6	11.4	34.9
White	5.6	5.0	2.6	4.9	12.7	16.2	13.8	12.3	37.5
Black	4.0	3.4	9.9	15.8	20.0	15.4	12.3	7.8	18.8
Hispanic	5.5	4.9	4.9	10.1	12.1	11.6	14.1	8.3	38.9
High school dropouts	5.2	4.5	8.4	8.8	13.5	14.1	9.2	13.9	32.1
High school graduates	5.6	4.7	4.1	7.4	15.1	14.4	12.4	8.3	38.3
Some college	5.3	4.8	4.3	7.4	13.1	14.5	14.9	12.4	33.4
College graduates	5.0	4.9	.8	4.7	12.0	19.7	16.6	14.7	31.5
Women	4.6	4.1	7.1	12.2	13.9	16.1	13.6	10.0	27.1
White	4.8	4.3	4.3	11.7	14.6	15.8	14.8	10.8	28.0
Black	4.0	3.3	17.6	15.0	12.9	17.2	8.5	5.4	23.4
Hispanic	4.0	3.7	20.5	13.1	5.9	17.0	10.0	10.2	23.3
High school dropouts	2.5	2.2	29.7	18.4	12.7	11.6	16.0	4.4	7.2
High school graduates	5.0	4.3	7.9	14.6	13.2	10.7	10.5	8.8	34.3
Some college	4.8	4.3	2.1	14.1	11.0	20.8	14.9	11.4	25.7
College graduates	4.6	4.3	1.3	4.6	18.1	22.0	16.4	12.8	24.8

Note: The 1- to 2- year category implies that an individual spent more than 1 year and less than or equal to 2 years on the longest job held. The other categories are defined similarly.

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

Men average about three-quarters of a year more at the longest job than women. The racial/ethnic differentials by gender are similar to the differences in work experience, in that white and Hispanic men average more tenure at the longest job than black men, and white women average greater tenure than black and Hispanic women.

Men differ little in time spent on the longest job by educational status. Yet for women, high school dropouts average only 2.5 years at the longest job, which is at least 2 years less than women in any other educational category. Nearly a third of all female high school dropouts average a year or less in their longest job.

Summary

There appears to be both mobility across jobs as well as a certain level of attachment to the labor market by individuals from age 18 to 30. While most individuals work in seven or more jobs during these 12 years, the majority of individuals are employed for more than 9 years, and over 40 percent work 11 years or more.

Different measures of job stability exhibit extremely different patterns. Information on time spent on the current job indicates that about 2 in 5 individuals have spent less than 2 years at their current job at age 30. In contrast, data on time spent on the longest job suggest that about 1 in 7 workers has spent fewer than 2 years at the longest job between age 18 and 30.

Blacks and female high school dropouts exhibit the least labor market attachment by age 30. Both accumulate less total work experience and are less attached to a particular employer over these ages. Female dropouts acquire the least work experience; most are employed less than half the time between age 18 and 30. At age 30, about 30 percent of all female high school dropouts have spent a year or less at their longest job, and about half have spent 2 years or less.

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Technical Note

Data in this report are from the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) which are sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The Bureau contracts with the Center of Human Resource Research of The Ohio State University to manage the surveys and provide user services. The NLS were begun in the mid-1960's with the drawing of four samples: Young Men who were 14-24 years old as of April 1, 1966, Young Women who were 14-24 years old as of January 1, 1968, Older Men who were 45-59 years old as of April 1, 1966, and Mature Women who were 30-44 years old as of April 1, 1967. Each sample originally had about 5,000 individuals with oversamples of blacks. In the early 1980's, the Young Men and Older Men surveys were discontinued. The two women's surveys continue and are currently collected every 2 years. The Bureau of the Census collects the data for BLS.

In 1979, a new cohort was begun with a sample of over 12,000 young men and women who were 14-21 years of age as of January 1, 1979. It includes oversamples of blacks, Hispanics, economically disadvantaged whites, and youth in the military. The military oversample was discontinued after the 1984 survey, and the economically disadvantaged white oversample was discontinued after the 1990 survey. This survey is called the Youth cohort, and the cohort members have been interviewed every year since it began. The data collection for the Youth cohort is undertaken by NORC (National Opinion Research Center), a social science research center affiliated with the University of Chicago.

The data in this report are weighted so that the sample is representative of the age group studied. The sample includes those individuals whose 18th birthday occurred after January 1, 1978 and whose 30th birthday occurred before the individual was interviewed in 1991. The sample was restricted to 1991 respondents, and the 1991 weight is used. All inferences that are discussed in the text are statistically significant at the 90-percent confidence level. Due to sampling variability, small differences that are not discussed in the text should be interpreted with caution.

The information presented here is slightly different from a previous issue of *Work and Family* (Report 827, August 1992) which provided data on the number of jobs held and weeks worked by age for individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. These differences occur primarily because the previous report included all jobs and weeks worked as of January 1 of the year the individual turned 18, rather than the 18th birthday. Also, the prior report only followed individuals through January 1, 1990. In addition, although the data are weighted, the samples used in the estimations in the two reports are quite different due to the deletion of the oversampled economically disadvantaged whites in 1991.

For a detailed explanation of the NLS, see *NLS Handbook 1993* (Center for Human Resource Research, The Ohio State University). For information about the NLS, or to be placed on a mailing list for this publication, write to National Longitudinal Surveys, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Research and Evaluation, 2 Massachusetts Ave., NE., Room 4915, Washington, DC 20212-0001, call (202) 606-7405, or Internet JAIN_R@BLS.GOV.

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